

The Southern Agrarians: A View After Thirty Years

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In 1930 a group of twelve Southerners, centered at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Tennessee, published a symposium entitled *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*. The twelve, variously called the Vanderbilt, Nashville, or Southern Agrarians, were the nucleus of a tiny group which became the principal Southern critics of modern industrialism in the years of the great depression. Never formally organized, the Agrarians were intensely individualistic and often disagreed among themselves on specific programs. They did, however, agree on a wide range of basic principles. *I'll Take My Stand* was a drastic, though unoriginal, criticism of industrialism and a eulogy of agrarian life and the Old South. It soon became the focus of a lively controversy in Southern intellectual and academic circles, spreading at times to other parts of the nation as well. The Southerners' condemnation of science, progress, and industrialism and their praise for rural life, fundamental religion, and political sectionalism made them objects of abuse and scorn by ideological opponents. In the final analysis their program had little concrete effect on the nation or the South; yet, as an element of arch-conservative, even reactionary, criticism of twentieth century industry capitalism, they merit the historian's attention.

The antecedents of the Vanderbilt movement go back much further than the stock market crash of 1929. Indeed, *I'll Take My Stand* was planned and largely written during the prosperity of the late 1920's, and was inspired by the Jeffersonian glorification of life on the farm and denunciation of the evils of industrialism and big cities. The South had always been agricultural. Its people had made their living from the soil;

its heroes since Washington and Jefferson had had strong agrarian connections; and its society had been oriented toward rural ideals to an extent greater than that of any other section. The historically-minded Agrarians were, in their opinion, direct ideological descendants of Jefferson and John Taylor of Caroline. But to them the true Jeffersonian tradition ran from Jefferson and Taylor through Calhoun and Jefferson Davis to twentieth century conservatism rather than from Jefferson through Jackson and Lincoln to twentieth century liberalism.¹ They considered the South's agrarian heritage to have been drowned out in the last quarter of the nineteenth century by Henry Grady, Walter Hines Page, and other "New Southists." The heritage, however, was dormant, not dead; its rejuvenation awaited only a favorable intellectual climate. Such a climate, thought the Nashville group, arrived in the 1920's. For this was a decade in which Northern liberals intensified their attacks on the South, in which industrialism penetrated into the South with disconcerting rapidity, but in which prosperity bypassed the Southern farmer.

The immediate background of the movement was in the group of poets and literati at Vanderbilt and Nashville who in the 1920's published *The Fugitive*, a magazine

¹ See for example, Andrew Nelson Lytle, "John Taylor and the Political Economy of Agriculture," *American Review*, IV (November, 1934), 84-99.

² I have defined "Agrarians" to include the contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* and the Agrarian contributors to the joint Agrarian-Distributist symposium, *Who Owns America?*, edited by Allen Tate and Herbert Agar. For accounts of the Fugitives see Merrill Moore, *The Fugitives: Clippings and Comment* (Boston: No Publisher, 1939); John M. Bradbury, *The Fugitives: A Critical Account* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958); and Louise Cowan, *The Fugitive Group, A Literary History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1959). The biographical data on the Agrarians was obtained from *Who's Who in America*, XXX (1958-1959), (Chicago: A. N. Marquis, Co., 1959); and Stanley J. Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, *Twentieth Century Authors: A Biographical Dictionary of Modern Literature* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1942). See also, Maxine Block (ed.), *Current Biography* (New York: The H. W. Wilson Co., 1940), pp. 790-791.

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of poetry and criticism. John Crowe Ransom, poet and literary critic, was the recognized, though unofficial, leader of both of the literary groups which became known as the "Fugitives," and of the Agrarians.² Ransom's influence perhaps more than anything else accounts for Vanderbilt's short-lived prominence in poetry, literary criticism, and agrarian thought in the 'twenties and 'thirties. Donald Davidson, Allen Tate, Cleanth Brooks, and Robert Penn Warren, who were English professors, poets, and literary critics, were prominent members of both groups. So also was Andrew Nelson Lytle, historian and novelist. Prominent Agrarians who were not Fugitives included historian, Frank L. Owsley; poet and historian, John Gould Fletcher; English professor, journalist, and novelist, Stark Young; and English professor and editor, John Donald Wade. Other prominent Agrarians were Georgia Tech economics professor, Troy J. Cauley; psychologist; Lyle H. Lanier; historian, Herman C. Nixon; and journalist, Henry Blue Kline.

In examining the biographical data of the Agrarians, one is immediately struck by their academic and literary prominence. They were intellectuals, doctors of philosophy, Phi Beta Kappa's, Pulitzer Prize Winners; they were not farmers. Apparently only one owned and lived on a farm in 1930. Their connection with the land and farming was likely to be through plantation owners or substantial independent farmers; they had only abstract acquaintance with agricultural laborers, tenants or sharecroppers suffering from grueling poverty, hard work, and the attendant physical and intellectual stagnation. The Agrarians were, however, all natives of the South or border states and had received at least a part of their education in Southern colleges or universities. In the early thirties almost all lived and worked in the South. Later prominence, however, would draw many of them north of the Mason-Dixon line.

In the mid-1920's the Fugitives lost interest in poetry and the "New Criticism" and turned their attention to fundamental social and economic problems. Catalyst for this change, according to Davidson, was the Scopes Trial and the resulting abuse heaped

on the South by the Northern press. This "was not the sole cause of change," he wrote in 1958, "but from about that time Ransom, Tate, Warren, and I began to remember and haul up for consideration the assumptions that, as members of the Fugitive group, we had not much bothered to examine." To the Fugitives the affair at Dayton "dramatized, more ominously than any other event easily could, how difficult it was to be a Southerner in the twentieth century, and how much more difficult to be a Southerner and also a writer." It was "horrifying—and frightening," recalled Davidson, "to realize that the South was being exposed to large-scale public deconstruction and did not know or much care how to answer."³

Immediately the Fugitives prepared to defend the South by reinforcing "Southern principles," and by frontally assaulting the premises upon which Northerners based their attacks on the South. The first fruit of this new endeavor was Davidson's series of poems, *The Tall Men*, which the author intended as a "dramatic visualization of a modern Southerner, trapped in a distasteful urban environment, subjecting the phenomena of the disordered present to a comparison of the heroic past."⁴ In 1928 and 1929 Tate followed with his biographies of Stonewall Jackson and Jefferson Davis, both of which showed strong pro-Confederate bias. In 1930 Ransom published his critique on modern religion, *God Without Thunder*, and Wade published his biography of John Wesley. In these works Ransom and Wade sounded the Agrarians' plea for a return to fundamental and authoritarian religion as one of the bases for a stable and secure society.

At this point *I'll Take My Stand* appeared. Since 1925 the Fugitive-Agrarians had been preparing this general declaration of principles. They considered the rapid growth of industry in the South to be the most insidious weapon of the enemy. From this they drew the central theme of their argument: that there was an irrepressible conflict between industrialism (representing all that was anti-traditional, immoral, and dead-

³ Donald Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), pp. 30, 40.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

ening) and agrarianism (representing all that was stable, moral, and uplifting to the human spirit). "Industrial commercialism was rampant," recalled Davidson, and "in no section were its activities more blatant than in the South, where old and historic communities were crawling on their bellies to persuade some petty manufacturer of pants or socks to take up his tax-exempt residence in their midst." The hope was, added Fletcher, that "some part of America might in some way be delivered from the incubus of the machine, from a false 'prosperity' emerging through applied science and industrial exploitation, and revolt in favor of a premechanical, preindustrial, handicraft state of proprietorship." Or as Tate put it, they sought to substitute for industrialism "the classical-Christian world" which was based "upon the regional consciousness, which held that honor, truth, imagination, human dignity, and limited acquisitiveness could alone justify a social order however rich and efficient it may be."⁵

In its largest aspects agrarianism was "the cause of civilized society . . . against the new barbarism of science and technology controlled and directed by the modern power state. In this sense, the cause of the South was and is the cause of Western civilization itself."⁶

Insofar as the intention of the "Twelve Tall Southerners" had been to provoke discussion of the relative merits of agrarianism and industrialism, they were successful. Their symposium was widely reviewed in both the Southern and Northern press and in scholarly publications. But much to their chagrin almost all the reviews were unfavorable, ranging from ridicule to harsh condemnation. The Birmingham *News* and its columnist, John Temple Graves, were apparently alone in favorably receiving the book. An editorial writer in the Macon *Telegraph* thought it "a high spot in the year's hilarity." The Chattanooga *News* dubbed the Agrarians the "Young Confederates" and spoke of their "delightful economic absurdities." The historian, U. B. Phillips, whose writings reflect a pro-Southern bias, was also critical. He began his review with the line. "In Dixie Land twelve take their stand and shed their ink for Dixie." The *New York Times* called

it "a sort of boy's Foissart set of tales."⁷

One of the harshest critics was the liberal Southern journalist and historian Gerald W. Johnson. Writing for *Harper's*, Johnson thought it "incredible that twelve men, all born and raised in the South, all literate, and all of legal age, could preach such doctrine without once thrusting the tongue in the cheek or winking the other eye." Concerning the Agrarians' philosophy, he thought it smelled "horribly of the lamp, that it was library-born and library-bred, and will perish miserably if it is ever exposed for ten minutes to the direct rays of the sun out in the direct rays of reality." In pointed contrast to *I'll Take My Stand*, Johnson described the agrarian South as a "hookworm-infested, pellagra-smitten, poverty-stricken, demagogue-ridden 'shotgun civilization.'"⁸

Underlying their general criticism, the reviewers and critics of *I'll Take My Stand* found serious shortcomings in the neglect of economics, and in the complete absence of concrete proposals for achieving the agrarian society. Also the attack on industrialism appeared in effect to be an attack on the twentieth century and thus unrealistic and impractical. In later writings the Agrarians attempted to answer these criticisms.

After their crusade had been launched, the Agrarians' next concern was finding publication outlets for their writings. In this they had little difficulty. During its brief existence from 1933 to 1937, the *American Review* served them almost as a semi-official organ. In addition they had articles published in *New Republic*, of which Stark Young was a staff member; *Hound and Horn*, a literary journal of which Allen Tate was Southern regional editor from 1932 until the magazine's demise in 1934; *Southern*

⁵ Donald Davidson, "I'll Take My Stand: A History," *American Review*, V (Summer, 1935), 306,303; John Gould Fletcher, *Life is My Song* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, Inc., 1937), p. 356; Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, p. 59.

⁶ Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, pp. 60-61; also, Davidson, *American Review*, V, 309.

⁷ Davidson, *Southern Writers in the Modern World*, p. 47; Davidson, *American Review*, V, 316-317; U. B. Phillips, "Fifteen Vocal Southerners," *Yale Review* (Spring, 1931), p. 611; Thomas J. Pressley, "Agrarianism: An Autopsy," *Seaweed Review*, XLIX (April-June, 1941), 154-155.

⁸ Gerald W. Johnson, "No More Excuses: A Southerner to Southerners," *Harper's Magazine*, CLXII (February, 1931), 333-334.

Review, which under Robert Penn Warren's editorship became their chief outlet after 1937; and *Sewanee Review*. Other magazines which published their writings included *Social Forces*, *Harper's*, *Scribner's*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *American Mercury*.

The *American Review*, most important of these periodicals for this study, was edited by Seward Collins and published in New York City. Editorially, it represented the extreme right wing. Three other groups were also regular contributors: English "Distributists"—men such as Irving Babbitt, Paul Elmer More and their following; and "Neo-Scholastics," who were described by Collins as "carrying on the Aristotelico-Thomist tradition in philosophy and applying it to modern problems." The purpose of the *Review*, wrote Editor Collins, was to provide a forum for the views of these groups of "Radicals of the Right," or "Revolutionary Conservatives" who were "radically critical of conditions prevalent in the modern world, but launch their criticism from a 'traditionalist' basis: from the basis of a firm grasp on the immense body of experience accumulated by men in the past, and the insight which this knowledge affords."⁹ Collins' editorials reflected an intense anti-communism which on occasion led him to praise Hitler and Mussolini. The pro-fascist writings were, of course, not reflective of Agrarian sentiment; however, apparently no one in the Vanderbilt group publicly criticized Collins' editorials.

Also of significance as a source of Agrarian ideology was the symposium *Who Owns America?*, edited by Allen Tate and Herbert Agar. Agar, chief American advocate of the English Distributists, agreed with the aims and basic principles of Agrarianism. His purpose in publishing *Who Owns America?* was to unite the Distributists and Agrarians in a joint effort to expose the evils of industrialism and other forces undermining traditional American society. Among the twenty-one contributors to this second symposium were Lanier, Owsley, Tate, Davidson, Lytle, Wade, Warren, Cauley, and Brooks. Other works of special value for the study of Agrarian ideas include Davidson's *Attack on Leviathan: Regionalism and Nationalism in the United States*, a collection

of his articles on regionalism; Lytle's *Bedford Forest and His Critter Company*, "an attempt to show General Forrest as he developed into the most typical man of the Agrarian South"; Cauley's *Agrarianism*, described by Davidson as the first presentation of "anything like a well-ordered analysis and defense of the economics of agrarianism"; and Nixon's *Possum Trot: Rural Community, South*, a description of the impact of industrialism on a small agrarian community.

The political, economic, and social philosophy of the Nashville group falls readily into a few major categories: (1) their concept of agrarianism versus industrialism; (2) their support of political sectionalism; (3) their attitudes toward the Negro "problem"; (4) their use and interpretation of history; (5) their attitude toward various "reform" programs in the 1930's; and (6) their concrete proposals for bringing about an agrarian society in the United States. Each of these categories requires detailed consideration.

The central theme of Agrarian philosophy was embodied in the concept of agrarianism versus industrialism. According to the Vanderbilt writers, the South (and the nation) was faced with the necessity of making an immediate choice between the two; otherwise, industrialism would win by default. But the choice was not between two more or less desirable systems. Industrialism, containing as it did the seeds of destruction of traditional American values and virtues, was an enemy and must be recognized as such. Furthermore, it did its work quietly and cloaked its subversion of order and stability with such ostensibly attractive rewards as "progress," "profits," and improved living standards. But these were merely deceptive and undesirable fronts for an otherwise naked exploitation. The Agrarians took upon themselves the task of explaining these facts to the public.

The Agrarians' condemnation included not only the factory system but all related social, political, and economic phenomena as well. This meant that they were resisting the major trends of the century. They criticized the "inhumanity" of modern industrial so-

⁹Seward Collins, "Editorial Notes," *American Review*, I (April, 1933), 122-127.

ciety; they objected to its "unbridled private enterprise; they rejected the idea of progress; they distrusted science and the modern public school systems which taught it; they were critical of the growth of large cities and urban living; they were apprehensive concerning the decline of fundamental religion; and, as Wilbur J. Cash has remarked, they had more than a few doubts concerning democracy.

To the Agrarians the inhumanity of industrialism stemmed from the fact that the individual worker was lost in a giant system of mass production. In such a system there could be no place for "the little man," the individual. Added to this was the impersonal nature of most industrial work. Agar complained that industrial workers were reduced to "humiliating, nerve-racking boredom," a boredom "qualified by fear—fear of losing their jobs, fear of annoying their straw-boss, fear (sometimes) that their private habits may not meet the taste of an impudent and nosy employer."¹⁰ Ransom likewise criticized "the labor of book-keeping, of banking, of shop-clerking, of tending monotonous machinery, of 'screwing on bolt No. 47'" as "too abstract and specialized to be enjoyed."¹¹

Finance capitalism, corporations and "unbridled private enterprise" were viewed as agencies responsible for the crass materialism of modern America. They gave too much emphasis to "getting ahead," mass production, and profits, and promoted "the too rapid industrialization of the South." Tate condemned capitalism in the United States as virtually a plot against the people. In order to perpetuate itself, he asserted, capitalism had resorted to a myth, a myth that it arose with American democracy and the Union and was the natural protector of these. But this theory, Tate believed, had been exploded by the depression, which revealed the nature of capitalism in its true light: "under the rationalization of 'democracy' capitalism has tended to reduce the masses of the population to a state of abject economic dependence, which approaches servility." But to Agar the depression was a blessing in disguise. In the 1920's the nation had been in danger of "going Hollywood," but "we were saved, not by our virtue, but by Providence." To him the lesson of "those

slack, disgusting years" was that "if a great nation worships private enterprise [by which he meant uncontrolled finance capitalism] it will land in the sty."¹²

Closely connected with their criticism of capitalism was the Agrarians' concept of private property. They believed that control was the *sine qua non* of ownership. Thus stock-holding in giant corporations was the very antithesis of ownership, and represented a threat to private property. As Tate put it, "A defender of the institution of private property will question not only the collectivist state, but also large corporate property." The big corporation, he believed, was "socially less responsible and eventually less efficient than collectivism." The solution, however, was not collectivism but a return to a society in which all property is held in small amounts.¹³

Another objectionable concomitant of industrialism was the idea of progress. Progress as the Agrarians understood it meant emphasis on change and growth, looking forward rather than backward. Cauley, calling for a "spiritual rebirth of the mass of the people," declared that "'progress' must cease to be the national fetish that it is. Discontent must cease to be 'divine' in the popular estimate and come to be regarded as the generally undesirable thing that it is." In no place was the ingrained conservatism of the Agrarians better expressed. And the same conservatism was explicit in their criticism of liberals who championed progress. Owsley complained that the "Old Fashioned Southern Liberals" were closely akin to socialists and communists. But, he added quickly, "I wish to apologize to the socialists and communists for this unfortunate comparison with the Southern Liberal, for while I cannot accept their Marxian doctrines, I respect their courage." An equally harsh critic of liberalism was Donald Davidson. Describing the

¹⁰ Herbert Agar and Allen Tate, *Who Owns America?* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1936), p. ix.

¹¹ John Crowe Ransom, "Happy Farmers," *American Review*, I (October, 1933), 531-532.

¹² Frank L. Owsley, "A Key to Southern Liberalism," *Southern Review*, III (Summer, 1937), 36; Allen Tate, "Where are the People?," *American Review*, II (December, 1933), 233-234; Herbert Agar, *Land of the Free* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1935), p. 151.

¹³ Allen Tate, "Notes on Liberty and Property," in *Who Owns America?*, pp. 81-93.

Southern liberals as "swashbuckling idealists who want the government to guarantee everything from bank deposits to tonsillectomy for mountain children," he could not understand why it was "illiberal to favor laws that forbid the sale of liquor, and liberal to favor those that forbid child labor."¹⁴

The Agrarians distrusted science, according to Cash, "almost as warmly as Bishop Wilberforce had once distrusted it." This aversion to science was based on their belief that it threatened "humanistic culture" by its emphasis on utilitarian approaches to modern living. Applied science, complained the authors of *I'll Take My Stand*, "had enslaved our human energies to a degree now clearly felt to be burdensome."¹⁵ In attacking science, the Agrarians were frequently led to an attack on modern public education, which was likely to imbue students with a respect for science. Davidson criticized "the great invasion of scientific and utilitarian subjects" in modern schools at the expense of the humanities. This, he complained, had led educators to concentrate on "what to teach and how to teach it" rather than "whom they are teaching and where." Modern education, based on textbooks written in the North and consequently critical of the South, was an "uprooting process" which failed to give young Southerners "the sense of belonging somewhere and being somebody." Not only were Southern students not being instructed in the Southern past, but they were being indoctrinated in the whole Northern way of life:

As a matter of course they were inclined to believe that culture comes out of books; that success, especially financial success, is virtue; that religion is a silly fable, or at best a loose rationalization of Christianity in terms of sociology; that progress is real and depends on science; that politics is unimportant and agriculture debasing; and that education really educates.¹⁶

Rejecting industrialism the Agrarians were naturally repelled by cities and urban life. The city, with "its cosmopolitanism, its skepticism, its falling birthrate, its lack of morals, its imitative and then its decadent art," stood for everything the Vanderbilt movement opposed. Furthermore, the cities attracted too many of the younger generation from the farm. So the Agrarians warned of the ills of city life. "A city of any sort re-

moves men from direct contact with nature, and cannot quite constitute the staple or normal form of life for the citizens," declared Ransom. But the cities of the machine age, he thought, "are peculiarly debased. They spring up almost overnight, a Detroit, an Akron, a Los Angeles. They are without a history, they are without a region, since the population is imported from any sources whatever; and therefore they are without a character." And, as Warren concluded, "Gopher Prairie is the kind of village that can be expected in a country where Chicago and New York are the great cities."¹⁷

The religious beliefs of the Agrarians conformed to their conservative, backward-looking philosophy. Believing that "an anti-religious agrarian is a contradiction in terms," they made religious emphasis a cardinal tenet of their philosophy. In essence they were urging twentieth century America to return to fundamental Christianity, with emphasis on the Old Testament rather than the New. Cleanth Brooks criticized the emphasis of modern Protestantism on "the social gospel" and "its regenerated zeal and earnestness about the conditions in which men live." He thought recent emphasis on morality, ethics, and humanitarianism had just about reformed Christianity out of existence.¹⁸

Although the Agrarians seldom made open attacks on democracy, a strong criticism was implied in much of their writing. This was especially true of their treatment of history. Lytle wrote contemptuously of the "rootless democracy" of Andrew Jackson based on universal white manhood suffrage. At the same time he wrote admiringly of the "true

¹⁴ Troy J. Cauley, *Agrarianism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1935), p. 210; Owsley, *Southern Review*, III, 28; Donald Davidson, "Dilemma of the Southern Liberal," *American Mercury*, XXXI (February, 1934), 228.

¹⁵ Twelve Southerners, *I'll Take My Stand*, pp. xi-xiii.

¹⁶ Donald Davidson, "Regionalism and Education," *American Review*, IV (January, 1935), 310-325; also, Davidson, *American Mercury*, XXXI, 233.

¹⁷ John Crowe Ransom, "The Aesthetic of Regionalism," *American Review*, II (January, 1934), 306; Robert Penn Warren, "T. S. Stribling: A Paragraph in the History of Critical Realism," *American Review*, II (February, 1934), 475.

¹⁸ Donald Davidson, "Agrarianism for Commuters," *American Review*, I (May, 1933), 241; Cleanth Brooks, "The Christianity of Modernism," *Ibid.*, VI (February, 1936), 435-446.

conservatism" of "the Carolina school of statesmen"—Hammond, Harper, Dew, Fitzhugh, Rhett, and Calhoun. Davidson praised "Calhoun's defense of Agrarian democracy," while Agar affirmed that a true agrarian democracy would restrict voting rights to those who own real property or have "proof of some knowledge of history and politics."¹⁹

In sharp contrast to the gloom of industrial society, the Vanderbilt writers eloquently described the shining utopia of rural living. On this subject they were prone to become victims of their imaginations. They recalled the benefits of agrarian living, conveniently forgetting its ills. Ransom contrasted the "mean" labor of industrial life with the "free" and varied labor of farming. The farmers' background, he wrote, "is the infinitude of an open landscape, where the distraction of the senses never ceases." In contrast to industrial life, the tempo of farm life "is not fierce, but almost of necessity leisurely." These benefits applied not only to the farm owner, for even the tenant "is permitted to express his own character better than any hired man in our society." Agar also noted this leisureliness in the agricultural South and described its effect on farmers. He found scattered throughout the South many people who were "a source of honest grief to their Northern observers: men and women who seem to feel no obligation to expand financially, who scorn the challenge of 'success,' who have time to talk, time to sit mooning and let the soul grow up, time to eat leisurely, time to walk with a gait suggesting the heresy that it is just as important to keep cool as to reach your destination."²⁰

The members of the Nashville group differed in their conception of the structure of an ideal agrarian society. Davidson, for example, favored a system centering around larger plantations, while Wade, Owsley, and Cauley were more concerned with the small subsistence farmer. "A true agrarian economy," according to Cauley, was "characterized by a general diffusion of property ownership," with each farmer owning enough land to insure self-sufficiency. To Cauley self-sufficiency meant "meal in the meal-barrel, meat in the smoke-house, sorghum in the jug, fruits and vegetables in the cellar,

and cows and chickens out around the barn." Also, he continued, "there might well be, insane as it no doubt will sound to all 'progressive' people, a spinning wheel and a handloom in the chimney corner." Under these conditions, the farmer could develop such "rural virtues" as "self-reliance, physical courage, moral integrity, loyalty, and hospitality."²¹

Agrarian literature abounds with descriptions of idyllic rural communities such as that described by John C. Rawe, an Agrarian-Distributist, for readers of *American Review*. In his country home, Rawe wrote, he could "secure a temporal happiness, be a worthy and cultured citizen, discharge my duties to my fellow man, fulfill my relations to God, join in social cooperative non-profit societies with my neighbors in order that we may protect ourselves against corporations and have a just share in the progress of scientific achievements, escape slum dwelling, refuse work at slave wages, be saved from the agony of unemployment, and with a righteous pride keep our names off the relief rolls."²²

The second major category of Agrarian thought related to political regionalism and the South's role therein. The contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* were unanimous in applauding Southern sectionalism and hoped to use it as the basis for a political system founded on Agrarian principles. This objective was based on historical, cultural, economic, social, and racial differences between the sections. They saw in such differences a sign of healthy variety, a safeguard against the "monistic and centralizing forces" of modern America. Davidson, the leading exponent of sectionalism among the Agrarians, defined it in part as "a movement of artists, uncovering what politicians and economists ignore; it is a revolt against the excessive centralism of the machine age." Another spokesman, Ransom, thought regionalism

¹⁹ Lytle, *American Review*, IV, 97; Davidson, *American Mercury*, XXXI, 229; Herbert Agar, "The Task for Conservatism," *American Review*, III (April, 1934), 15-22.

²⁰ Ransom, *American Review*, I, 531-532; Agar, *Land of the Free*, p. 161.

²¹ Cauley, *Agrarianism*, pp. 108-127; also, Troy J. Cauley, "The Integration of Agrarian Exchange Economies," *American Review*, V (October, 1935), 585.

²² John C. Rawe, "Agrarianism: The Basis for a Better Life," *American Review*, VI (December, 1935), 184-185.

much more reasonable and natural than "non-regionalism," whatever the latter might be called—"cosmopolitanism, progressivism, industrialism, free trade, interregionalism, eclecticism, liberal education, the federation of the world, or simple rootlessness."²³

In large part the regionalism of Davidson, Ransom, Owsley, and others was the direct heir of the pre-Civil War sectionalism of the South. It was based on jealousy and resentment of the North and Northern domination of American ideals; it attempted to place the South outside the main stream of American development; it perpetuated Southern economic and political backwardness; it conveniently left the fate of the Negro up to the white South.

The third category of the Agrarians' thought, their attitude toward the Negro, showed no deviation from Southern orthodoxy. Their treatment of the Negro was always in the abstract—as a "problem" of Southern whites. They never concerned themselves with the Negro as a human being and their writings reflected a racism of the rankest sort, including even justification of lynching. They believed that the Negro was happiest and best cared for in the South, whether slave or free. Under the slave system, declared Tate, the white man's "historical sense of obligation" had made him "in every sense responsible for the Black" and had prevented abuse of the Negro, for the "Black man 'free' would have been exploited." Similarly Owsley declared that the slave "was well treated as a rule" and was generally regarded "as a member of the family" by ante-bellum whites. Consequently "separation of families was much less frequent under slavery than under the capitalistic industrial system of today." "In these days of insecurity," he wrote during the great depression, "it is pleasant to note that the slave possessed a great sense of security." The master cared for the slave from birth until death "whereupon he was given a Christian burial in the family cemetery, and quite frequently . . . he had a marble slab with affectionate sentiment inscribed upon it placed at the head of his grave."²⁴ By these and other arguments the Agrarians revealed their biased resistance to efforts by the federal government and Northern liberals to wage a

civil rights campaign aimed at revolutionizing the status of the Negro in the South. The Agrarians, recognizing the danger to white supremacy, sought to discredit that campaign. That the Agrarians wished and hoped that Southern Negroes would continue to accept an inferior status was implicit in all their writings touching the race issue.²⁵

The Agrarians, like other Southerners intensely conscious of the South's past, were interested in history, and made wide use of history to support their position on contemporary issues. Their interpretations were essentially economic; indeed economic determinism was almost as important to them as to the Marxists whom they so detested. Their interest in history began with Jefferson, but Jefferson before he "had hamstrung himself with all-Federalist-all-Republican doctrine." Like other conservatives the Nashville writers stressed certain phases of Jefferson's philosophy, e.g., his emphasis on decentralized government, his praise of independent subsistence farmers, and his distrust of urban "mechanics" to the virtual exclusion of his emphasis on political democracy, religious liberalism, and public education. In their view Jeffersonianism must be brought up to date. As Davidson declared, "It is impossible to conceive a Jefferson who would argue abstractly for freedom and tolerance against the background of a highly centralized government and the industrial economics which the Southern liberals half accept and half reject."²⁶

While Jefferson, at least the early Jefferson, was likely to be a hero of the Agrarians, Jackson was their *bête noire*. Agar referred to Jackson's "thoughtless rant about 'democracy'" and considered the Jacksonian revolution a hoax, for under it "we got adult manhood suffrage (the form of freedom) without a single step being taken to preserve widely distributed property (the reality

²³ Donald Davidson, "Sectionalism in the United States," *Hound and Horn*, VI (July–September, 1933), 564; Ransom, *American Review*, II, 293–294.

²⁴ Bradbury, *op. cit.*, p. 90; Owsley, "The Old South and the New," *American Review*, VI (February, 1936), 478–479.

²⁵ The Agrarian attitude toward the race issue is excellently summarized by John Gould Fletcher in a "Letter to the Editor" of *Nation*, CXXXVII (December 27, 1933), 734–735.

²⁶ Andrew Nelson Lytle, "The Backwoods Progression," *American Review*, I (September, 1933), 419; Davidson, *American Mercury*, XXXI (February, 1934), 228.

of freedom).” “The typical shibboleths of ‘union’ being held more precious than liberty, the constitution as imperious to logic, cheap money and big business as more important factors in life than either leisure or high thinking” date from Jacksonian democracy, asserted Fletcher. And Tate believed that “it is just possible to see Calhoun and Andrew Jackson as the Christ and anti-Christ of political order in the United States.” Thus, Calhoun and the conservative, pro-Southern tradition became their rallying point. Calhoun’s doctrine of the concurrent majority was to Lytle “an idea which seems in retrospect, the proper solution of the difficulties of the union,” while the South Carolinian’s theory of nullification was “the ultimate measure of workable union between sovereigns.” There was no logical answer to Calhoun’s logic, he concluded.²⁷

The Agrarians saw the Civil War and Reconstruction as a struggle of the agricultural South, representing liberty and private property, against the industrial North, representing sectional imperialism and uncontrolled finance capitalism. To Fletcher, the war was a struggle of the New England minority which “regarded the perfect form of civilization as a collection of industrial bourgeois city-states, strongly practical in aim, egalitarian in essence, dependent on absolute liberty of the citizen,” against the Southern minority which “envisaged the perfect state as a collection of loosely-combined agrarian communities, maintained precisely by the development of slavery as an institution, and governed by an elite of aristocrats, whose activities, released from manual toil, could flow into intellectual channels.” Southern heroes of this period, from Robert E. Lee to the Ku Klux Klan, received warm praise from the Agrarians.²⁸

After Reconstruction the conflict between agriculture and industry continued, but now the struggle was between rival groups within the South. Now there were the “Wool Hat Boys”—Tom Watson and the Populists against the New South liberals, who had sold out to Northern industrial imperialists. To the latter, declared Wade, the ills of industrialism were so bad that they “preferred poverty, which was patently within endur-

ance, to a prosperity founded on assumptions” they “thought fatal to all dignity and completeness of living.” Under Watson’s leadership they fought “to save the conditions that had made possible such a man as Lee.”²⁹

Some of their strongest strictures the Agrarians reserved for the traitorous “New Southists.” To Lytle they were “modern scalawags who have cut themselves off from the country-side and withdrawn into the cities, where they openly acknowledge their servile dependence on New York.” And “for a small share of the booty . . . they have either consciously or unconsciously become the sucking mouths of those industrial octopuses whose long arms wrap about the ‘provinces.’” Similarly, Owsley accused men such as Grady, Page, and Sidney Lanier of “sycophancy.” Davidson was even more outspoken. He considered Page, editor of *Atlantic Monthly* and *World’s Work*, to be “at bottom a brilliant opportunist, incapable of original thought, devoid of principles other than the loose concepts of nineteenth century idealism, and most of all devoid of Southern principles.” He “was no philosopher-economist, but a journalist who was taken in by the half-baked idealism of the Rooseveltian era.”³⁰

In their conviction that the real cure for solving the depression and reforming capitalism lay in reorienting society toward agriculture the Agrarians criticized all the multitudinous reformers who sprang up in the depression era. They went to great length to expose the shortcomings and futility of programs advocated by Huey Long, Dr. Townshend, the Liberty League, communism, socialism, capitalism, fascism, technocracy, and most of the New Deal, including the NRA, AAA, and TVA. The Agrarians

²⁷ Agar, *Land of the Free*, pp. 61–63; Fletcher, *The Two Frontiers: A Study in Historical Psychology* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1930), p. 300; Bradbury, *op. cit.*, p. 90; Andrew Nelson Lytle, “John C. Calhoun,” *Southern Review*, III (Winter, 1938), 529–530.

²⁸ Fletcher, *The Two Frontiers: A Study in Historical Psychology*, p. 299; Frank L. Owsley, “The Soldier Who Walked with God,” *American Review*, IV (February, 1935), 437; Andrew Nelson Lytle, *Bedford Forrest and His Critter Company* (New York: Min’ton, Balch and Co., 1931), p. 384–385.

²⁹ Owsley, *American Review*, VI (February, 1936), 482; John Donald Wade, “Jefferson: New Style,” *American Mercury*, XVIII, 299.

³⁰ Lytle, *American Review*, I, 430; Owsley, *Ibid.*, VI, 482; Davidson, *American Mercury*, XXXI, 232.

seem, in fact, to have distrusted all "reformers" and "planners" from principle, failing to see that they were themselves both reformers and planners. Lytle, for example, noted that the federal constitution included no provisions for national planning, and expressed the opinion that "rule by planning and rule by principle are antithetical." Similarly, Davidson thought that "planning even of a mild variety does not remove us from the much discussed evil choice between Fascism and Communism, but probably forces us nearer to it." To him, social and economic planning was based on the false assumption "that everybody will stop fighting, cheating, and vituperating and be a good Christian."³¹

Next to communists and industrialists, the Agrarians considered their chief antagonists to be a group of sociologists and regional planners at the University of North Carolina, led by Howard Odum, Rupert Vance, and W. T. Couch. These North Carolinians, who published *Social Forces*, were in the tradition of the "New Southists," and advocated a Southern economy balanced between industry and agriculture and a regionalism that considered the South as a lesser part of the larger nation.³² They saw the solution of Southern farm problems in better business methods, more farm machinery, and improved farming techniques, and they thought of the Agrarians as "professional Southerners," too much concerned with tradition. They believed the reduction of all economic and social problems to industrialism versus agrarianism was the result of false reasoning. But they chiefly criticized the Agrarians for ignoring such basic problems as tenant farming, poor whites, and race and class antagonisms. As Vance said, it was not enough to be against "mediocrity in art and letters, against American nationalism, against communism, against Southern liberalism, against the tariff, against farmers keeping books, against Yankees, and against the Juggernaut, the last being the outcome of the Civil War."³³

Among the North Carolinians, W. T. Couch, then editor of the University of North Carolina Press, was most disposed to engage the Agrarians in controversy. Where the latter found life in the rural South full of "order, leisure, character, stability," and

"esthetically enjoyable," Couch found 1,700,000 tenant farmers, white and black; "the last stronghold of child labor," and "women who have to cook, sew, wash and iron, and who have to work regularly in the fields planting, hoeing, and harvesting, and who are not protected by any laws or customs regulating their hours of labor." In one of his most biting and sarcastic passages, Couch asked:

Who receives the much prized virtue of farming? The one who owns the soil or the one who digs in it, or both? It is clear that if the owner who does not dig receives the virtue, then this virtue is not derived from the actual digging. Perhaps it is derived from managing. But if so, why the very low position of the overseer? Or perhaps it is derived merely from owning. But if this is true, then the absentee owner, the merchant, and the banker in New York may be the real beneficiaries. Contrariwise, if the much praised agrarian virtues are derived from actual contact with the land and animals, then we are led to ask what kind of contract will bring the greatest measure of virtue. Obviously, if the closest association is the most efficacious, then those who work most regularly and for the longest time at the actual tasks of farming, must receive the greatest measure of agrarian excellence. According to this formula, they must be superior citizens. This means simply that agrarian doctrine suggests by implication the superiority of the Negro slave over his white owner, or, to use the traditional phrase, that the Negro field hand was the flower of Southern chivalry.³⁴

The chief deficiency of the Agrarians' early writings had been their failure to include specific goals and proposals for achieving them. After the unfavorable reception of *I'll Take My Stand*, Agrarian literature dealt much more in concrete aims and methods, and this constituted the final category of their ideas.

³¹ Lytle, *Southern Review*, III, 511; Donald Davidson, "Expedients vs. Principles—Cross-Purposes in the South," *Ibid.*, II (Spring, 1937), 659.

³² For a comparison of the attitude of the two groups on regionalism, see Howard W. Odum, "The Case for Regional-National Social Planning," *Social Forces*, XIII (October, 1934), 6–23; and Donald Davidson, "Where Regionalism and Sectionalism Meet," *Ibid.*, pp. 23–31.

³³ Marion D. Irish, "Proposed Roads to the New South: Chapel Hill Planners vs. Nashville Agrarians," *Sewanee Review*, XLIX (January–March, 1941), 1–27; Rupert B. Vance, "Is Agrarianism for Farmers?," *Southern Review*, I (July, 1935), 42–45.

³⁴ W. T. Couch, "Reflections on the Southern Tradition," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, XXXV (July, 1936), 284–297; W. T. Couch, "The Agrarian Romance," *Ibid.*, XXVI (October, 1937), 426; see also, Peter A. Carmichael, "Jeeter Lester: Agrarian Par Excellence," *Sewanee Review*, XLVIII (January, 1940), 21–29.

Their central aim was to bring about a society consisting primarily of subsistence farmers with all other facets of society appendages to this group. While it would be impossible for the farmer to subsist completely outside the money economy, his concern with money crops would be of secondary importance, for too much money in the hands of the farmer, according to Cauley, "would from the Agrarian point of view constitute calamity."³⁵ To achieve this subsistence farming society, large scale commercial farming must be abolished. Accordingly farming by corporations must be forbidden, real property redistributed, and the use of farm machinery discouraged, perhaps by taxing the sale of farm tractors and other heavy machines.

Concurrently with the decentralization of agriculture would come the decentralization of industry. Special laws would discriminate against large corporations, promote small business, and encourage the handicrafts and regional self-sufficiency. All legal protection given corporations by the fourteenth amendment would be removed; ownership of stock in corporations by non-employees would be heavily taxed. Also government regulation of business would be greatly extended, and the protective tariff abolished. The role of government would be extensive. The national and newly established regional governments would be given whatever power was necessary to make and maintain these changes. Public utilities and other natural monopolies would be publicly owned to prevent exploitation of farmers. Farmers would control the government because ownership of real property would be a prerequisite for voting.³⁶

The means for attaining these objectives were detailed by Frank Owsley. In his article, "The Pillars of Agrarianism,"³⁷ which received enthusiastic Agrarian endorsement, Owsley developed five pillars upon which his new society would rest. The first was rehabilitation of farm population, from planters to day laborers. In this connection Owsley anticipated no problem from the tenant class but feared that "po' white trash" might be too "irresponsible" or "vicious" to profit from his proposals. Those Negroes in the tenant class "who know how to take

care of the soil and who own their own stock and cattle, should be made proprietors of small farms. For the remaining Negroes and the "white trash" Owsley never found a satisfactory place in the new order. To begin the rehabilitation the government, either state or national, would purchase all land held by insurance companies and absentee landlords and part of that owned by large planters. Then the government would "give every landless tenant who can qualify, eighty acres of land, build him a substantial hewn log house and a barn, fence him off twenty acres for a pasture, give him two mules and two milk cows and advance him \$300 for his living expenses for one year." [Apparently this gift would not conflict with the agrarian virtue of self-reliance.] The gift would be conditional upon agreement that the land could never be sold or mortgaged and if abandoned "it should automatically escheat to the state."

After the rural population had been rehabilitated, all "technologically unemployed, intelligent city people" would be returned to the farm in a two-phased movement. First would come those with farming experience; then those who had none would follow. The latter group would be required to serve an apprenticeship as tenants on large plantations before becoming eligible for government homestead grants.

Owsley's second pillar was rehabilitation of the soil. In view of the social responsibility of land ownership, "undrained, untterraced, single-cropped land, and lack of reforestation, should be prima facie evidence that the homesteader is not a responsible person and his land should, after fair warning and action in Chancery Court, escheat to the state." Farmers who possessed land by purchase or inheritance rather than government grant would be heavily fined if, after repeated warning, their abuse of the land continued. The mortgaging of land except "by consent of a court of equity," and speculative sales and sales to real estate firms, insurance companies, and banks would be prohibited alto-

³⁵ Cauley, *American Review*, V, 592-593.

³⁶ The most general statements of the program of the Agrarians are found in Cauley, *Agrarianism*, and Agar and Tate, *Who Owns America?*.

³⁷ Owsley, "The Pillars of Agrarianism," *American Review*, VI (March, 1935), 410-434.

gether. "I am suggesting," wrote Owsley, "a modified form of feudal tenure where, in theory, the King or state has a paramount interest in the land."

Owsley's final pillar called for creation of a new system of regional governments which would function on a level between the national government and the states, and would act as a guarantee for sectional equality. To Owsley the United States was "less a nation than an Empire," whose primary sections were New England, the Middle States, the Middle West, the Rocky Mountain and Pacific States, and the South.³⁸ He urged establishment of an intermediate government over each of these regions and the reduction of the states to administrative units. The federal government would have "supreme control over war and peace, the army and navy, interregional or even interstate commerce, banking, currency, and foreign affairs." All other powers would be expressly reserved to the sectional governments. Each section would have equal representation in the federal legislative body, supreme court, cabinet, and presidential elections. The federal legislature would be unicameral, its members elected by the regional legislatures. Members of the supreme court would be appointed by regional governors and ratified by regional legislatures, which would also be unicameral. Finally, the regional governments would have an absolute veto over tariff legislation.³⁹

With the waning of the great depression and the coming of World War II, the Vanderbilt Agrarian movement disappeared. In 1937 the *American Review* ceased publication and the volume of Agrarian writings decreased markedly thereafter. In the same year Ransom left Vanderbilt for Kenyon College and editorship of the *Kenyon Review*. The dispersal of the Agrarians had begun; by the early 1940's only Owsley and Davidson among the leaders remained at Vanderbilt. But dispersal was only a secondary factor in the collapse. Of much greater importance was the antipathy encountered on all sides. Neither sociologists, economists, journalists, politicians, nor farm leaders were impressed by Agrarian ideas. To these groups the Agrarians were romantics attempting to think themselves back into the certainties of

an earlier age. Furthermore, the Agrarians' criticism of science, progress, and modern public education won them scorn and ridicule. Even in the South the Agrarian movement never received the attention or support its members hoped for. The average Southerner was totally uninfluenced by it. Intellectuals, the immediate targets of the Agrarians, refused to accept it. Ordinary dirt farmers never heard of it. It seems safe to say that the movement had no effect on Southern agriculture.

Despite this, the Nashville writers have a definite place in the history of the 1930's. They were one of several traditionalist, authoritarian, generally anti-capitalist groups—English and American Distributists, French Royalists, Neo-Catholics, Humanists—which flourished in the depression decade.⁴⁰ Each of these groups represented in some way the reaction of conservatives to twentieth century economic changes; each in some way gave expression to the dilemma of conservatives caught in the drift toward centralized government, modernized religion, and commercialized mass culture. In this context the Agrarians achieve a significance which they do not otherwise deserve. In this context their ideas, and the discussion of economics and history which they stimulated, become meaningful to the historian; they reflect the discontent of one group in our society to the capitalist system as it had developed in America.

In 1952 the Washington and Lee University publication, *Shenandoah*, devoted the major part of its summer issue to a critique of the Nashville movement. The introduction of the critique, written by Richard M. Weaver, noted that the Agrarians had disappeared as an organized force and blamed this disappearance on Southern "collaborationists" who had sold out to industry, bus-

³⁸ The regions were not further defined. "Of course," Owsley wrote, "the region to which a state wished to affiliate would be determined by a plebiscite." He said nothing about a state which refused to join any region.

³⁹ Some of the Agrarians would give the regional governments much more authority than Owsley. See for example Davidson, *American Review*, VI (February, 1936), 431-432.

⁴⁰ See Dudley Wynn, "A Liberal Looks at Tradition," *Virginia Quarterly Review*, XII (January, 1936), 59-79; Joseph H. Fichter, S. J., "A Comparative View of Agrarians," *Catholic World*, CXLIII (September, 1936), 654-659.

iness, and progress. "There is no more melancholy spectacle on the American scene," wrote Weaver, "than the fact that South Carolina, which in former times set the best example of the ideal of chivalry, is now the site of the hydrogen bomb plant."⁴¹

The editor of *Shenandoah* submitted a series of questions to Ransom, Davidson, Owsley, Tate, Nixon, Lytle, and Wade asking them to comment on the Agrarian movement in light of the historical perspective provided by developments of the 1940's and 1950's. The replies revealed that the group had not abandoned their opposition to industrialism or their general pessimism for the future of America. They considered the economic prosperity of the forties and fifties to be a false prosperity based on a war economy. True, this prosperity had temporarily ameliorated the horrors of industrialism but it had merely postponed the inevitable choice between industrialism and agrarianism. Their program, they believed, was as realistic for the 1950's as it had been for the 1930's. The Cold War necessitated no changes in their basic principles; they had always been anti-communist.

Davidson was still the most outspoken on the evils of industrialism. While crediting

industry with providing more automobiles, airplanes, refrigerators, and atom bombs, he blamed it for "the infliction of war, death, and destruction on an unprecedented scale." He also blamed it for wasting natural resources, degrading society, perverting education, undermining religion, and invading and abridging constitutional liberties. "It has spread confusion and suspicion," he wrote, "it has begotten corruption and treason; it has reduced millions to a state of groveling servility and fear."

In the year 1963 it is easy to condemn the Agrarians. Yet their philosophy was the result of a long study of the shortcomings of modern industrial society. In keeping these shortcomings before the public they performed the essential and valuable service of all critics. Sincerely convinced of the correctness of their ideas, they fought valiantly against insurmountable obstacles. Whether one considers them crusaders crying in the wilderness or Don Quixote's tilting at windmills, one must admire their earnestness and forthrightness, their ability as stylists, their intellectual prowess.

⁴¹ Richard M. Weaver, "The Tennessee Agrarians," *Shenandoah*, III (Summer, 1952), 9.

A note on Conservation is found under *An Abridgement of the Laws in Force and Use in Her Majesty's Plantations 1704*, under Acts of Assembly, and Laws of Jamaica—Rates and Prices—Anno 1682 Act 4, p. 13, III, "Who shall destroy any Turtle Nests, or take away any of the eggs thereof, he shall forfeit 40 s. or receive as many Lashes on the bare back as any Justice shall order, not exceeding 39, for every Offense."

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